

Almost Inverses by nfna118

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Summary:

Monday, August 25, 1980.

So if Dustin was normally so excited about the first day of school, why was he feeling like this now?

Point 1. He didn't know any of the other kids, because

Point 2. This would be his first day at Washington Elementary, and

Point 3. It wasn't even the heckin' first day of school.

Almost Inverses

Author's Note:

One-shot in a canon-compliant Byler universe.
Updates to come approximately whenever I feel like it!

Monday, August 25, 1980

Dustin felt the sunlight on his face first. “Nope,” he grunted and pulled the comforter over his head. Of course, when had that ever stopped his mom?

“Dusty-bun,” she cooed, “You have to get up! It’s the first day of school!”

Dustin produced an unintelligible moan in response, rolling onto his side and further tangling himself in his sheets.

“You know how much you love school!” she tried. “Aren’t you excited to make new friends?” Hearing no response, she soldiered on, turning up the cheeriness dial. “You know who’s excited for school?” She paused for dramatic effect. “Mr. Tickles!”

Dustin squeaked and stating squirming before his mom’s hands were anywhere near the bed. “Mom! No!” he shouted, thrashing around even more as she actually started to tickle him. Somehow he ended up laughing, out of breath, upside-down, and half-off his bed, his legs still tangled in the sheets.

“Well, looks like you’re awake now!” Claudia smiled. “Breakfast’s ready... I made pancakes!”

“Pancakes?” Dustin squawked indignantly. “Why didn’t you tell me that first?”

Claudia just smiled.

Dustin soldiered his way through the small talk at the breakfast table, avoiding having to respond much by shoveling food in his mouth. He

was normally excited for the first day of school, sure. He would get to learn so many cool new things and have access to science equipment and get to hang out with his friend and –

“Honey, what’s wrong?” his mom asked.

“Nothing, honest!” He plastered on a grin and took a final swig of orange juice. “Gotta go brush these pearls!”

His mom swatted the back of his head. “We’re leaving in five minutes!” she called after him.

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mom.” He sighed once he was out of earshot. So if he was normally so excited about the first day of school, why was he feeling like this now?

Point 1. He didn’t know any of the other kids, because

Point 2. This would be his first day at Washington Elementary, and

Point 3. It wasn’t even the heckin’ first day of school.

School had started last Wednesday, and he’d begged his mom to make sure that they moved to Hawkins on time so he could start like a normal kid, but *no*. There was some problem with the mortgages or something that had delayed everything by a week and now here he was, Dustin Henderson, freak extraordinaire, starting fourth grade on the fourth day of school. Way to make a great first impression. If he was lucky, he’d blend in and everyone would assume he’d been there since day one. If he wasn’t, well, there were some things he wouldn’t miss from his old school.

So now here he was in his mom’s sedan, half his brain keeping up with his mom’s small talk while the other half was freaking the heck out. He and his mom had already met with the principal after school on Friday, so he knew where his classroom was and everything, but – everything else was a mystery. Dustin was not a man of mystery. He was a man of science. And plans. And not having a plan right now was really hecking uncomfortable.

“Hey, Mom?” he butted in. “You know how you like to kiss me before I leave? Could you – maybe not? I wanna try to fit in here.”

He watched his mom's face fall slightly before she hid it behind a mask. "Whatever you say, Dusty. You're gonna have a great day. I just know it!"

"Uh-huh," Dustin replied non-committally. Washington had just come into sight around the bend. Everyone was going in through the main entrance. Some kids were walking or riding bikes – mostly boys on the bikes. Buses were still arriving, so he wasn't late. Good. He watched a line of kids file off the latest bus to arrive. He had started to turn his head when he noticed two boys near the back of the line break off and head towards the drop-off line. *Weird*. He tracked them with his eyes. They were probably fourth or fifth graders by height, one white and one black. Nothing too unusual, except – he glanced around – *is he the only black kid in the whole school?* Huh. Maybe Hawkins really was the middle of nowhere.

The two boys stopped at the beginning of the drop-off line. The white one said something that made the black guy punch him in the shoulder, then they both broke down laughing. Dustin wrinkled his nose. *Immature boys*.

Soon enough, a boy got out of the car two in front of theirs. Dustin watched as the new boy's mom blew him a kiss out the window. "No," he warned his mom, lifting a finger before she could say anything. "Don't get any ideas!" His mom needed to be handled carefully, lest she do anything embarrassing. He returned his attention to the three boys, who were now walking shoulder-to-shoulder into the school. He wondered what they were talking about. Probably something dumb like sports. Regardless, it was now time for Dustin to make his exit. "Bye, Mom," he called casually as he opened the door and slung his backpack over his shoulder. "See you this afternoon!"

"Bye, Dusty-bun!" she called back. Dustin waved, but he was already turning towards the entrance. *Let's do this*.

* * *

He can't believe he's getting away with it. While everyone else was hanging in the gym or clogging the hallways, Dustin had made his way straight to Ms. Coleman's classroom. Not the first student, not

the last student. Second-to-last row, furthest desk to the left. Perfectly inconspicuous. No one even seemed to notice he was there. He was blending right in. No one even gave him a second glance except the shortest of those three boys. Black was giving Tall a hard time, and Tall had eyes only for Short. Everything was going fine until –

“Class, we have a new student today!” Short pivoted to stare directly at him while everyone else turned their heads with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. “Dustin, would you come up here and introduce yourself?”

Okay. So this was happening. Thoughts ran through his head as he stood up and made his way to the front of the class. His mom thought he shouldn’t, but what does she know... The teachers know already, but it would get out sooner or later. Might as well be sooner, right? Control the narrative and all that?

“Hi.” He gave a little wave. “Not a strong beginning, but at least he had their attention. “My name is Dustin. Dustin Henderson. I just moved to town.” He noticed some people starting to stare at his mouth. “Yeah, I don’t have a lot of teeth. I have a genetic condition called cleidocranial dysplasia. No, you can’t catch it, ‘cause it’s genetic.” Short hid a smirk behind his hand at that. The corner of Dustin’s mouth turned up. “But that also means I don’t have a collarbone, so I can do this!” And with that, he pushed his shoulders together in front of his chest. “Ta-da!”

He glanced around the classroom to gauge reactions. Several girls looked grossed out, and Ms. Coleman looked a little green around the gills herself. Black gave him two thumbs up, Short gave him a dazzling smile, and even Tall gave him a grudging nod of admiration, although his expression slid some when he glanced over at Short.

“Th – thank you, Dustin,” Ms. Coleman stuttered. “Now, then...”

Dustin tuned her out as he walked back to his seat, glancing at nametags as he walked past the wonder trio. *Lucas, Will, and Mike. Lucas, Will, and Mike. Lucas, Will, and Mike.*

“Hey,” the boy behind him whispered as he sat down. “That was rad! I’m Greg, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dustin whispered back, twisting his torso to offer a hand. When he turned back, Lucas, Will, and Mike quickly averted their gazes. What was *up* with those three?

Everything was going smoothly until math class. Ms. Coleman was reviewing the order of operations, and while she wasn’t technically saying anything wrong...

“Yes, Dustin?” Ms. Coleman seemed a little surprised to see his hand. She’d get used to that soon enough.

“Miss, you know you don’t have to do multiplication before division, right? You can do both of them together from left to right. And the same with additional and subtraction.”

“But then, why does ‘M’ come before ‘D’ in ‘PEMDAS’ then, hmm?” She quirked an eyebrow at him. Not annoyed yet, just pushing back. Good.

“I mean... I don’t know. Someone thought that it sounded better than ‘PEDMAS’ I guess, and it’s not like you can superimpose the two letters. But just try the problem both ways. You’ll get the same answer.”

She thought for a moment. “Hmm, yes, in this case you do, but how do you know that will always hold true?”

“Because they’re inverse operations!” Dustin was grinning now. “Dividing by two is the same as multiplying by one half!”

“That does make sense. Stay a few minutes after class and we can explore this more, alright?”

Dustin nodded, mollified for the moment. He shrank back in his seat as he noticed the other kids staring at him. Most looked confused and a little suspicious, but the wonder trio – *Lucas, Will, and Mike*, he reminded himself – looked... considering, like he was the last cupcake on a deserted island. Well, that would make it a desserted island. He cracked himself up.

As everyone else was grabbing their lunchboxes and lining up, Dustin headed up to the teacher’s desk. “You wanted to see me, Ms.

Coleman?”

She peered at him over her glasses. “Ah, yes, Dustin. Where did you say you went to school before this?”

“I didn’t, but, uh...” Dustin paused, “Long Island.”

She nodded. “And what do your parents do?”

“My mom stays at home for now, but she’s looking for jobs in the area,” Dustin said glibly. “And my dad worked for the government.”

“You were right, you know. Well, almost.”

Dustin jerked his head. This conversation had no transitions whatsoever.

“Almost?” he spluttered.

Ms. Coleman smiled. “Almost,” she repeated. “Multiplication and division are almost inverse operations. But not quite.”

“What? What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

She gave him a mysterious smile. “Let me know when you figure it out.”

Oh. So *that’s* how it was going to be. She was *good*.

“Now go ahead and line up,” she said, shooing him away as she straightened out her papers.

Dustin headed to the back of the line to join Greg, weathering the stares of the wonder trio as he passed them. He bared his lack of teeth at them, laughing as Tall – *Mike* – flinched back a little.

* * *

Dustin was going to sit with Greg at lunch – he really was. But Dustin’s mom had packed him a lunch and Greg needed to wait in line, and he needed to choose *somewhere* to sit at the two tables Ms. Coleman’s class was assigned to. There was a group of girls down at

one end, already giggling. That was a no-go. The only other person already sitting down was Lucas. He steeled himself. He'd have to confront wonder trio eventually, and this was his best opportunity – divide and conquer, as his third grade teacher always said (although, to be fair, she was usually referring to actual division when she said it). His heart was beating rapidly as he slid in next to Lucas. “Hey, Lucas.”

Lucas's head whipped towards him. “How do you know my name?”

Dustin's eyes widened. He wasn't expecting this level of aggression right off the bat. “I... I saw your nametag as I walked past your desk?”

“Oh.” Lucas's whole face softened as he stuck out a hand. “Nice to meet you, Dustin.”

Dustin smiled and shook. “Nice to meet you too!”

“So, uh...” Lucas glanced around surreptitiously and brought his voice down. “Can you do that shoulder thing again?”

Dustin considered. Prurient interest was better than outright mockery. “Sure,” he conceded, and proceeded to do the shoulder thing.

Lucas shuddered, but continued to smile. “That's far out, man!”

Dustin chuckled awkwardly as he opened his lunch bag. “Thanks, man.” By this time, Mike and Will were making their way back from the lunch line, each carrying a tray. As they got closer, Dustin saw that Will had a curious expression on his face and Mike was scowling.

“What's *he* doing here?” Mike asked in a surly tone as soon as he was within earshot.

“Mike!” Will squeaked, aiming a kick at his ankle.

Mike grimaced as he sat down, shaking his foot. “Ow, what was that for?”

“Be polite!” Will hissed back, nearly too soft for Dustin to hear. He

glanced over to see Lucas rolling his eyes at the pair. Okay, so:

Observation 1. Will, whatever his personal feelings were, liked to be polite.

Observation 2. Mike does not like him. Yet.

Observation 3. This is normal behavior for the wonder trio.

“Nice to meet you, Will,” Dustin said, sticking out a hand.

Will smiled and shyly took his hand. “You too.”

“Nice to meet you, Mike,” Dustin continued, a challenge in his eye as he turned to Mike.

“How’d you know about inverse operations?” asked Mike.

Dustin blinked at the non sequitur. “What?” he asked stupidly, his hand still out.

“You were talking to Ms. Coleman about inverse operations. Did you learn about them at your old school?”

Dustin scoffed as he slowly put his hand down. “Of course not. I read about them.”

“Where?” Mike fired back.

Dustin sucked in a breath. This was a make-or-break moment. “My teacher last year let me borrow a fifth grade math book to read for fun.” Lucas quirked an eyebrow and Will outright grimaced, but Mike nodded approvingly for a moment before his face sharpened again.

“Who’s your favorite superhero?”

Dustin blinked. Did everyone converse like this in Indiana? Lucas’s amused smirk and Will’s look of slight disapproval suggested otherwise, but at least this was an easy question.

“Wolverine, obviously. His regenerative powers are the best!”

Mike frowned. “What about Batman?”

“Batman?” Dustin was indignant. “*Batman?* What about Batman? He doesn’t have any healing powers. He doesn’t have *any* powers at all! He’s just a regular dude who lives alone with his butler and like... fights crimes sometimes. You can’t be a superhero without superpowers.”

Lucas offered a high-five as Mike rocked back, gobsmacked. He started spluttering, but Lucas cut him off. “Dude. We’ve been saying that for years!”

The ice broken, Dustin let the conversation wash over him as he ate his sandwich. Will and Lucas made an effort to include him, but Mike still mostly just scowled at him, even going so far as to scoot closer to Will so he wouldn’t have to sit directly across from Dustin. At least the scowl had a glimmer of curiosity now.

“Hey, Mike,” Dustin called as they got up to throw their trash away.”

“What.”

“They’re not actually inverse operations.”

“Huh?”

“Multiplication and division. Ms. Coleman told me after class that they’re almost inverses, but not quite.”

“Hmm,” Mike furrowed his brow. “Do you know what she meant?”

“No. Would you wanna... try to figure it out together?”

Mike thought for a moment. “Yeah, fine. Whatever.”

A smile appeared unbidden on Dustin’s face.

* * *

Friday, August 29, 1980

So it turned out that the first week in Hawkins wasn’t actually as terrible as Dustin had feared. Ms. Coleman was smart and appreciated when he asked questions in class. He wasn’t a cool kid by

any stretch of the imagination, but Lucas and Will had accepted him into their little group where they could nerd out and no one else made fun of them – so what more could you really ask for? Mike was – a work in progress. He'd stopped scowling every time Dustin was around, but still didn't make any effort to include him. Lucas had pulled him aside on Wednesday and explained how first-grade Mike had been a dick to him at first, so that made Dustin feel a little better. It also caused him to notice that Mike was notably surlier when Will included him than when Lucas did.

But things were looking up. The wonder trio usually hung out at Mike's after school, and today Dustin had been invited to join them. His mom had been ecstatic that he'd made friends already and couldn't wait to meet them – “well, you'll just have to wait, sorry, Mom!” – and now he found himself on the bus to the Wheelers' house.

“Hey, man,” called Lucas, lightly punching him on the shoulder, “You still there?”

“Yeah, yeah, sorry... I got lost in my thoughts for a bit. What were you saying?”

“Just that Mrs. Wheeler has the best snacks. Yo, Mike,” he called over his shoulder, “did you tell your mom that Dusty's coming over today?”

Dustin smacked him. “Don't call me that!” Lucas just stuck his tongue out.

“Uh...” Mike trailed off, “I think so?” Will rolled his eyes and whispered something. “Oh, yeah, yeah. I definitely did.”

“Sweet,” Lucas crowed. “Baked goods for all!”

Mike wrinkled his nose. “How do you know?”

“Because I know your mom,” Lucas replied, “And Karen Wheeler always makes a great first impression.”

Mike whacked him on the head. “Don't call her Karen... that's weird!”

Dustin looked on, bemused, as they continued to trade barbs back and forth. Physical contact wasn't really a thing in his old group of friends. It had shocked him at first to see how much they all touched each other, even if most of it was playfully adversarial. Lucas was always having these fake altercations with Will and Mike, and they gave back as good as they got. That's not to say Mike and Will didn't touch each other... it was just usually – softer. Mike putting out a hand to help Will up from the floor. Will touching Mike's shoulder in sympathy when he's ranting about something Nancy did. Or their knees casually knocking together, like right now.

"Anyways!" cut in Will, "You're both missing the point."

"Huh?" asked Lucas, confused. Mike just turned slightly, his face softening immediately.

"The important question here," Will continued impatiently, "is cookies or brownies?"

"Ooh." Lucas paused. "You're right, Will. That's the million-dollar question. I think it's gonna be brownies."

"Nah," Mike disagreed. "She just got a new bag of chocolate chips yesterday. It's gonna be cookies."

"Whoa, hold up! Chocolate chips can go in brownies too!"

Dustin grinned. "Only the best brownies."

"Hell yeah!" Lucas raised his hand for a high-five – to which Dustin happily obliged.

"Hey, as long as it has chocolate chips, I'll be happy," Mike retorted. "None of that oatmeal raisin BS."

"Hey!" Will squawked. "I like oatmeal raisin!"

"Gross." Mike wrinkled his nose. "You're gross." Will just rolled his eyes fondly.

During this time, other students had been steadily getting off the bus, and the four of them were now the only remaining passengers. "Uh,

guys?” he asked. “I’m guessing we’re next?”

“Oh, shoot,” Mike muttered. “Yep, my house is right there.” He pointed at the nice house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Dustin nodded once. *Checks out.*

They piled off the bus and haphazardly made their way up the driveway and over to the carport door. “Mom!” Mike shouted, “We’re home!”

Dustin winced. “Is he always that loud?” he stage-whispered to Lucas, causing Will to giggle and Lucas to nod long-sufferingly.

Mrs. Wheeler bustled out of the kitchen, clearly pregnant, carrying a tray of –

“Brownies!” Lucas pumped his fist. Dustin glanced over the top of the tray – it looked like they had chocolate chips too. Score.

“Hello to you too, boys,” Mrs. Wheeler replied. “You must be Dustin!” she continued, handing the tray off to Mike – an extraordinarily bad idea in Dustin’s opinion – and shaking Dustin’s hand. “I’m Mike’s mom.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Wheeler.”

She had a funny look on her face. “Oh, you can just call me Karen.” Dustin swallowed a grimace. Calling adults by their first names was still uncomfortable. “Anyways, go on and have some brownies before Mike finishes them all. I’m sure they’re heading down to the basement.” She gestured, and sure enough, Mike and Lucas had already disappeared, leaving Will at the top of the stairs to guide him down.

“Whoa,” he said as he got to the bottom of the stairs. “Is this all yours, Mike?”

“I mean,” Mike hesitated, “there’s like... laundry and my dad’s workbench and stuff. But Nancy never comes down here or anything. It’s mostly just me and Will, and Lucas.”

Dustin caught the slight hesitation and filed it away for consideration

later. “That’s so cool!”

“Yeah, I guess,” Mike muttered testily, turning away.

Dustin shared a look with Lucas. Mike was getting pissy again. This had been happening all week. Everything would be going just fine, then Dustin would tease Will or cut in when Mike was about to say something or say something himself that apparently rubbed Mike the wrong way and Mike would just – shut down. Lucas kept giving him sympathetic looks and telling him to wait it out, that it would get better... but screw that. Mike wanted to be a little bitch? That was gonna end now.

“Hey,” called Dustin at Mike’s back, “What’s your problem, man?”

“Huh?” Mike turned around, visibly confused but still apathetic.

“Look. Let me lay it out for you. I’m new here. I get it. I haven’t been friends with you since first grade or whatever. I thought you were interested in being friends with me. I’m chill with Will and Lucas –” they nodded in agreement – “but you keep randomly finding this stick up your butt and shutting me out. You invite me over here and then you start the same BS. What gives, man? Do you want me to be your friend or not?”

Mike just stood there, dumbfounded. Lucas started to slow clap before Will shot him a withering look. Mike continued to stand there, making no move to speak.

“It’s not a big deal,” Dustin continued, although it definitely was. “I can just call my mom to come pick me up early and I’ll hang with Greg next week or something. Get out of your hair.”

By this point, Will had turned his withering look on Mike, and god if the thought of having sweet Will Byers look at him like that didn’t make him shiver all over. He watched Mike and Will have a conversation entirely with their eyes and single syllables.

“I –”

“Mike.”

“But –”

“No.”

A sigh. An implacable stare. And then Dustin found Mike turning to face his direction once more. He was staring down at the carpet, scuffing a foot and decidedly avoiding eye contact. “M’sorry,” he mumbled.

“What?” Dustin asked. Will added an elbow for good measure.

Mike winced and rubbed his arm. “I said, I’m sorry,” he repeated, looking up at the vicinity of Dustin’s face.

“Thank you,” replied Dustin seriously. “Do you want to be my friend?”

“Yes!” replied Mike immediately. “I – yeah. I do. I promise. I’m sorry I’m being weird about it. I just –” He suddenly looked panicked. “I gotta pee. Be right back.”

Dustin frowned in confusion, but then heard telltale sniffles as Mike barricaded himself in the bathroom. Will excused himself quietly and followed Mike, leaving Dustin with Lucas and an overwhelming feeling of guilt. “Did I – make him cry?”

Lucas shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “He’ll be fine in a few minutes. You didn’t do anything wrong. People need to call him out on his BS more. Uh, brownie?”

Dustin chuckled, taking the awkwardly proffered brownie. “Oh, man,” he said after the first bite, “you were right. Mrs. Wheeler is good at baking.”

Lucas nodded in agreement, chocolate already staining his smile.

“So, uh,” Dustin ventured after a few minutes of brownie-indulged bliss, “Are they, y’know?” He jerked his thumb towards the bathroom door.

Lucas just furrowed his brow further, taking another bite.

Dustin rolled his eyes. “Are they, y’know, dating?” He watched as Lucas’s eyes widened comically.

“What? No!”

Dustin shrugged. “Okay, I was just asking. Sheesh.”

Lucas’s eyes darted around. “Look, man, I don’t know what it was like where you grew up, but it’s dangerous to say that kinda thing around here, got it?”

“Got it,” replied Dustin, miming locking his lips and throwing away the key. “But, like, you see it, right?”

Lucas shrugged. “They’re just best friends. They’ve been like that ever since. I’ve known them. They’ve probably been like that since –”

“The first day of kindergarten, yeah, yeah.” Dustin rolled his eyes. “So what are they doing in there if they’re not K-I-S-S-I-N-G?”

“Ew, gross. But like. It’s not common or anything, but this sort of thing has happened before. You might have noticed that Mike’s not great at processing his emotions.” Dustin snorted. “Sometimes it’s just like – Does Not Compute. Like he’s a robot and tried to divide by zero or something. And Will –”

“Wait. Hold up. Hold the phone,” Dustin interrupted. “Lucas. That’s it! You’re a genius!”

“I – thanks? But what –”

The yelling must have caught Mike’s attention, because the bathroom door opened. “You’re calling Lucas a – hey! You started eating brownies without us?” Mike sounded outraged, but a smile quirked around his lips as Lucas shrugged, brownie hanging out of his mouth.

As Mike and Will caught up on their brownie intake, Dustin kept sneaking glances over at Mike. There was no hint that anything had been wrong just a few minutes before, save that he and Will were sitting just a *little* too close together on the couch.

“So,” said Mike after a bit, half-chewed brownie still in his mouth,

“What did Lucas do to make you mistakenly think he’s a genius?”

“Hey, buzz off!”

“Yeah, screw you too, Mr. Brownie-Stealer.”

Dustin cleared his throat. “Inverse operations.”

“Oh?” Mike leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “He figured it out?”

“Well, no. But he reminded me about dividing by zero.”

Mike slapped his forehead. “Duh. Of course. You can multiply something by zero but $0/0$ is undefined.”

“Exactly!”

They shared a grin, then Mike tentatively stuck a hand out. “Friends?”

Warmth bloomed in Dustin’s chest as he shook. “Friends.”

* * *

Friday, September 5, 1980

Dustin had learned at a young age that science explains how the world works. He already had a hypothesis. Now he just needed observations.

Observation 1. Will and Mike were always together. They sat next to each other on the bus, in class, at lunch, on the couch in Mike’s basement. They didn’t go to the bathroom together, but that was about the only time Dustin saw them apart.

Observation 2. And even more than that, they were – touchy. Dustin was a pretty physical guy himself, although he hadn’t had the opportunity to express that part of himself at his old school. He’d never say no to a high-five or a good hug, but he’d never seen guys interact the way Mike and Will did. Will would use touch to regulate Mike’s often-volatile emotions. Touching knees, a hand on a forearm, a shoulder bump – heck, even just a poke – and Mike would redirect

and focus on Will. So maybe that was just how Will had learned to survive the constant exposure to the Mike Wheeler Experience. But Mike – Mike’s touches were casual. He’d sling an arm around Will’s shoulders on their way up the driveway or start tickling Will’s side when he was bored or take the flimsiest of conversational excuses to just be in physical contact, whether that be a poke or a slap or full-on wrestling.

Observation 3. Lucas didn’t seem fazed by any of this. He had to know that it wasn’t normal, since he didn’t engage in physical contact the same way with them, plus that whole conversation in Mike’s basement last Friday. So this wasn’t a new development spurred by Dustin’s arrival. They’d just – always been like this, to the point that Lucas was desensitized.

Observation 4. The rest of the students seemed to leave the wonder trio – and now, by extension, Dustin – pretty much alone. They couldn’t be blind to it, but like Lucas, they seemed to accept it as a fact that didn’t warrant further scrutiny. Inconceivable. All facts deserve scrutiny.

Observation 5. While the three of them had obviously spent a lot of time together and had a lot of in-jokes, sometimes it felt like Mike and Will had their own private language, consisting entirely of subtle facial expressions. When Lucas asked if they wanted to get ice cream after school, Mike glanced at Will before saying, “Yeah, we’d love to.” When Will got called up to the teacher’s desk (just to let him know his mom wouldn’t be able to pick him up and that he should take the bus to Mike’s house instead, mind you – nothing bad!), he glanced at Mike, who did something with his face that caused the tension to drain out of Will’s face. That wasn’t to say they were always on the same page, but even then the disagreements were mostly carried out silently until one of them (Mike) broke and apologized.

Observation 6. That was another thing. Dustin remembered how hard it was to drag an apology out of Mike last Friday. Mike could be a stubborn butt. But when it came to Will, the apologies always came immediately once Mike realised he’d messed up.

Observation 7. Dustin was jealous. Okay, that observation wasn’t

strictly within the parameters of the investigation, but it was at least tangentially related. Lucas was always ready to spar, physically or intellectually. Will was sweet and supportive. But Mike – Mike got him. They'd gone up together to a very pleased Ms. Coleman to explain why multiplication and division were *almost* inverses. They'd started mirroring each other's vocabulary. When Dustin started on one of his science tangents, Mike could actually keep up with him. It was thrilling, invigorating. But there was this layer of Mike that Dustin couldn't access, that only Will could get to. And sure, he'd only known Mike for a week or two – but it still hurt.

"Hey, Lucas," said Dustin around a bite of his sandwich.

"Hmm?"

"I take it you're a betting man?"

"Heck, yeah." Lucas looked intrigued.

Dustin nodded consideringly. "I bet you that –" he lowered his voice – "Mike and Will will end up dating."

Lucas's eyes darted around, checking that they were alone before replying softly. "Nah, man, they're just good friends." Dustin waggled his eyebrows, causing Lucas to roll his eyes. "Fine. What are the stakes?"

"Twenty bucks."

Lucas's eyes went wide. "Holy – twenty bucks? You're crazy."

"So do we have a deal, then?"

"Well, hold up. We need a timeframe, 'cause otherwise you can just claim it hasn't happened yet until one of them dies."

"Hmm, yeah, that's fair. By the end of high school, then?"

Lucas thought for a long moment before nodding. "By the end of our graduation ceremony." He stuck out a hand.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Dustin replied, shaking Lucas's

hand vigorously.

“Business?” asked Will, sliding into the seat across from Lucas.

“Uhh,” said Lucas eloquently.

“What my illustrious business partner means to say,” Dustin cut in, “is... that we’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“But –”

“Shhh.” Dustin held a finger up to Will’s lips, earning himself a slap and ferocious scowl from Mike. And there it was. A hand on an elbow, a slight head tilt with meaningful eyes, and Mike backed off. Dustin knew Lucas couldn’t do that, and he certainly couldn’t. There was still some internal stewing from Mike, but at least it was internal.

“So.” Dustin clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention. “Who’s excited to see La Casa de Dustin tonight?”

* * *

His mom had driven them all home after school. Dustin felt no compunctions about forcing the other three to snuggle up in the backseat. It was his car after all, so he got shotgun, and it’s not like Mike and Will were even any closer than normal – though he noticed Mike leaning away from Will towards the window. Huh.

Dustin gave them a tour of the half-complete house and his mom periodically gorged them with snacks (he knew she just did it to keep an eye on them, but the bribe of food was sufficient for him to let it slide).

And so, they found themselves in pajamas, post-dinner, post-movies, ensconced in sleeping bags in Dustin’s room. This was always Dustin’s favorite part of a sleepover, when you could talk about things you couldn’t talk about any other time. He hoped that this could cement the bond and make the wonder trio a wonder quartet officially. But of course, Mike had to open his fat mouth first.

“So where’s your dad, Dustin? – Ouch! What the heck, Will?” Will’s mouth was a flat line. “Oh, shit. I mean.”

"It's okay," Dustin cut in before Mike could get caught in the circles of his own mind. "He's –" he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Dead."

Crickets. Well, probably cicadas or some shit because Indiana, but still. *Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.* He opened his eyes when he felt a hand on his knee – Lucas's – and he happily accepted Will's arm, leaning in for a side hug.

Mike looked like a deer caught in the headlights. "I. Uh."

Dustin waved a hand dismissively, forcing his lips to curve upwards. "It's – it is what it is. It was a long time coming. We knew he had cancer. It was only a matter of time. That's, uh, that's why we moved here. The government actually gave us a lot of money."

"The government?" asked Lucas.

"Yeah, Dad works – uh." He paused. "Worked for the government. Some secret base nearby. He could never talk about what he did, but I'm guessing it must have been dangerous. Probably Cold War shit. Taking down the Russians and all that. And I guess it gave him cancer, 'cause, uh, why else would the Feds pay us a buttload of money to move away?"

Lucas shrugged awkwardly.

"So, uh... what about your dads?" Dustin asked to take the attention away from him as he discreetly turned away to wipe his eyes.

"My dad's... gone," Will offered, after a moment. "He left my mom when I was in kindergarten." Mike's eyes widened and, yup, there it was – a hand on the small of Will's back. "He used to yell and call us names and..." he trailed off, then shook his head to clear it of something. "Anyways, I still see him sometimes, but it's, uh, easier having him far away." He grimaced, and Mike jumped into the conversational gap.

"My dad's barely alive," he started, then immediately clarified. "Not. Not like that. Sorry. Bad choice of words. He's..."

"Asleep?" suggested Lucas.

“Lackadaisical?” offered Will. “He’s – there. He’s physically present, but doesn’t ever do anything with me. He used to like try to play catch with me and stuff but, uh, I was never very good at it and... yeah. He’s either at work or watching TV or asleep on his new La-Z Boy.” Dustin watched as Mike shrunk in on himself.

“Uh, my dad’s cool,” Lucas picked up the slack. “Well, not cool,” he amended, “because, y’know, he’s my *dad*, but... he’s around and gives me life advice and stuff. He used to be in the army and has a bunch of cool war stories and stuff.” He trailed off looking at the distant faces surrounding him. “Uh, group hug?” he suggested awkwardly, eyebrows furrowed and mouth slightly open.

Will nodded decisively. “Group hug,” he agreed.

And then, Dustin felt himself being pulled in, Will on the left and Lucas on the right and Mike right in front of him. He felt himself ensconced in a tangle of limbs. He felt a smile break out unbidden across his face. And, for the first time in a long time – he felt like maybe everything could be okay again. He closed his eyes, resting his forehead on Mike’s for a long moment. He had *friends*.